



Proverbs - Introduction

II. INSPIRATION AND AUTHORSHIP.--With no important exception, Jewish and Christian writers have received this book as the inspired production of Solomon. It is the first book of the Bible prefaced by the name of the author. The New Testament abounds with citations from the Proverbs. Its intrinsic excellence commends it to us as the production of a higher authority than the apocryphal writings, such as Wisdom or Ecclesiasticus. Solomon lived five hundred years before the "seven wise men" of Greece, and seven hundred before the age of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. It is thus very evident, whatever theory of his sources of knowledge be adopted, that he did not draw upon any heathen repositories with which we are acquainted. It is far more probable, that by the various migrations, captivities, and dispersions of the Jews, heathen philosophers drew from this inspired fountain many of those streams which continue to refresh mankind amid the otherwise barren and parched deserts of profane literature.

As, however, the Psalms are ascribed to David, because he was the leading author, so the ascription of this book to Solomon is entirely consistent with the titles of the thirtieth and thirty-first chapters, which assign those chapters to Agur and Lemuel respectively. Of these persons we know nothing. This is not the place for discussing the various speculations respecting them. By a slight change of reading some propose to translate Proverbs 30:1 "he who was obeyed Massa," that is, "the queen of Massa"; and Proverbs 31:1 earliest versions are contradictory, and nothing other than the strongest exegetical necessity ought to be allowed to justify a departure from a well-established reading and version when nothing useful to our knowledge is gained. It is better to confess ignorance than indulge in useless conjectures.

It is probable that out of the "three thousand proverbs" (1 Kings 4:32 Proverbs 1:1-24:34 production, and copied out in the days of Hezekiah, by his "men," perhaps the prophets Isaiah, Hosea, and Micah. Such a work was evidently in the spirit of this pious monarch, who set his heart so fully on a reformation of God's worship. Learned men have endeavored to establish the theory that Solomon himself was only a collector; or that the other parts of the book, as these chapters, were also selections by later hands; but the reasons adduced to maintain these views have never appeared so satisfactory as to change the usual opinions on the subject, which have the sanction of the most ancient and reliable authorities.

III. DIVISIONS OF THE BOOK.--Such a work is, of course, not susceptible of any logical analysis. There are, however, some well-defined marks of division, so that very generally the book is divided into five or six parts.

1. The first contains nine chapters, in which are discussed and enforced by illustration, admonition, and encouragement the principles and blessings of wisdom, and the pernicious schemes and practices of sinful persons. These chapters are introductory. With few specimens of the proper proverb, they are distinguished by its conciseness and terseness. The sentences follow very strictly the form of parallelism, and generally of the synonymous species, only forty of the synthetic and four (Proverbs 3:32-35 ornate, the figures bolder and fuller, and the illustrations more striking and extended.

2. The antithetic and synthetic parallelism to the exclusion of the synonymous distinguish Proverbs 10:1-22:16 unconnected, each containing a complete sense in itself.

3. Proverbs 22:16-24:34 addressed to a pupil, and generally each topic occupies two or more verses.

4. Proverbs 25:1-29:27 portion, for the reason given above as to its origin. The style is very much mixed; of the peculiarities, compare parts two and three.
5. Proverbs 30:1-33 a specimen of the kind of proverb which has been described as "dark sayings" or "riddles."
6. To a few pregnant but concise admonitions, suitable for a king, is added a most inimitable portraiture of female character. In both parts five and six the distinctive peculiarity of the original proverbial style gives place to the modifications already mentioned as marking a later composition, though both retain the concise and nervous method of stating truth, equally valuable for its deep impression and permanent retention by the memory.

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